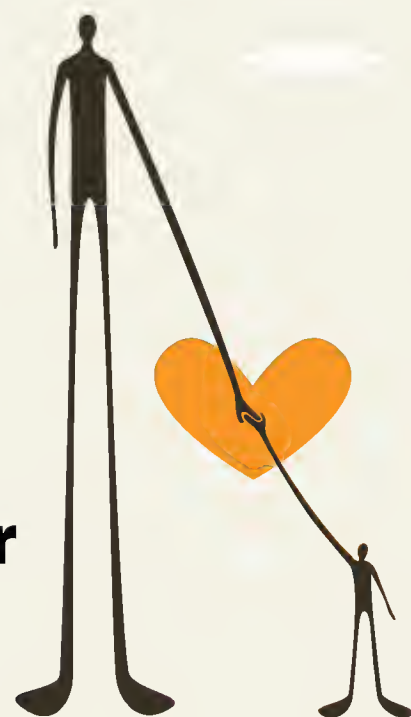


Listening Carefully to the Narratives of Young Adolescent Youth of Color

Amy S. Johnson Lachuk & Mary Louise Gomez



Culture and community are considered key aspects of effective middle level education (National Middle School Association, 2010). Effective schools for young adolescents are inviting, inclusive, and supportive; are staffed with adults who support youths' academic and personal development; and affirm the important role that families play in educating youth. In this article, we suggest that middle level educators can use the tools of research—specifically, narrative inquiry—to better understand the lives of the young adolescents they teach and to develop more supportive classroom communities and cultures. Such inquiry can enrich and deepen teachers' complex understandings of adolescent students' lives, enhance adolescent students' affiliation with school, and develop relationships between middle level teachers and their students.

Using research tools drawn from narrative inquiry methodologies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Linde, 1993; Mishler, 1999), teachers can come to understand dimensions of adolescent students' lives that are not otherwise apparent. We encourage middle grades teachers to use such methods in their everyday practices as a means of student support and advocacy. In this article, we ask: How can middle level teachers draw on tools of narrative inquiry to better

understand and support their students' academic achievement, school affiliation, and general well-being? We illustrate the value of narrative inquiry through the stories of three adolescent students, gathered through life history interviews. All of these stories show key dimensions of the students' lives to which teachers ordinarily might not be privy. We then connect the students' stories to the broader literature that discusses both the importance of family in schooling and research concerning African American families and the diverse resources they can leverage to support their children's education.

The role of family in the educational lives of three students of color

Amber

Amber Madison (all names of people and places are pseudonyms) was a sixteen-year-old African American female who attended Pinesville Community Charter School (PCCS), a pre-K-to-12 public charter school in a rural community in the southeastern United States. Amy (first author) asked Amber, who was raised by her aunt and uncle, to recount the role her family had

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents — Adult Advocate — Family Involvement

played in her educational experiences. She described how, in addition to seeking out the assistance of her aunt and uncle, she had intentionally recruited adults from diverse contexts in her life to construct an extended “family” network to help her attain her educational goals. She mentioned two teachers from her earlier years of schooling, Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Monroe, whom she considered to be family, stating “I look up to Mr. Hunter as a father.” Amber told Amy how she enjoyed talking with him, and she said she knew he cared about her well-being. She also recalled how Mrs. Monroe had functioned as a mother to her, frequently checking in on her and reminding her of the consequences of her actions: “She will tell me, ‘No, you should not have done that,’ or ‘Why did you do it?’”

Amber had demonstrated agency by pulling together a family unit that put her on the path to attaining her educational goals. This unit included teachers who were willing to accept these roles in Amber’s life; Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Monroe demonstrated deep interest in Amber, showing her they were willing to go beyond the usual role of teachers. They inquired about her life and shared parts of their own lives, forming strong personal bonds with Amber. Consequently, Amber’s academic achievement and sense of affiliation with school were boosted, and she was able to extend her circle of support to adults beyond her aunt and uncle.

Jonathan

Jonathan Reynolds was a seventeen-year-old African American male who, like Amber, attended PCCS. Jonathan was living with his grandparents, mother, and younger brother. When Jonathan was asked to describe the role of education within his family, he recounted the influence that his grandmother has had on his education from the time he was young.

My grandma always told me that education is something that we’re gonna need, because it can take us a long way in life. ... Dropping out of school’s not a good idea because you can’t get a good, [respectable] job. So you might want to stay in school, get a good education, and go to college. And that way you won’t have to work for anybody. You can work for yourself, and you’ll be making a good living.

Within Jonathan’s biography, from his early schooling on, there had been a history of adults stressing educational

attainment. In Jonathan’s family, the value placed on education had been passed down intergenerationally through stories and a repeated emphasis on how education helps the entire community.



Teachers can create more supportive classroom environments by getting to know their students well. photo by Ken Cluttsam

BeBe

BeBe Clark was another seventeen-year-old student at this same school. BeBe was living with her adopted mother, whom she described as intentionally advocating for her education in the middle grades.

My seventh grade year, I came here [to Pinesville Community Charter School]. I came here because my mother, she really didn’t care for [my neighborhood school] too much, because, you know, the kids up there were so bad. My mother really didn’t want me to be in that environment, so that’s why I came here right when they built this school. And I like it. My Mom saw it as a smaller environment with more one-on-one with the teacher.

BeBe’s mother, a middle grades teacher, knew about the educational resources available within her community and was able to leverage this knowledge for BeBe’s benefit by making sure she attended the best school possible.

Significance of students' life histories

At first glance, Jonathan, BeBe, and Amber's words may not carry the same significance for middle level teachers as they did for us as researchers. These three adolescents were, after all, now high school-aged youth preparing to enter college. However, as we see it, Jonathan, BeBe, and Amber's recollections of the significance of family to their educational lives have profound and critical implications for middle grades educators. Throughout

of adolescent youth as disconnected from family and, specifically, parents. We also noticed how adolescents like Amber intentionally pieced together a family unit from teachers, community members, and extended family members to help them attain their educational goals. Finally, we realized how our interpretations of these stories challenged the tendency in education to focus on the role of the immediate, nuclear family in students' lives.

Amy's interviews also revealed the power of "going the extra mile" for youth—stepping out of traditional

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their lives, these youths had families that consistently enforced the value of educational attainment, telling them repeatedly to "stay in school, because it gets you where you want to go." What Jonathan, BeBe, and Amber believe today about education is the result of their families' continual and explicit involvement in their educational endeavors. Through their words and deeds, these youths' families gave them educational opportunities and access.

We uncovered these stories highlighting the significance of families through Amy's extensive life history and ethnographic study of literacy and education within the Pinesville community, an African American majority community located in an area of persistent poverty within the United States (see Johnson & Cowles, 2009; Johnson, 2010). Amy conducted life history interviews with African American persons ranging in age from 15 to 65, and she noticed how involved parents were in their children's educational lives. Youth who participated in the study often described the significant role family played in their current educational experiences.

When we discussed these findings, we saw how they supported in powerful ways much of the literature on African American families (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2003; Gadsden, 1992, 1998, 1999, 2000 McAdoo, 2007) that contradicts common myths about African American parents and families—that they do not care about or are not invested in their children's schooling. We also saw how the stories challenged some popular portrayals

of what parents are expected to do (for example, support their children's teachers, bring snacks for class parties, help with students' homework) or how good teachers behave (for example, deliver content with clarity, demonstrate depth of content knowledge) to become advocates for youth and inquirers about youth. We believe this work cannot be left to those who are paid to "care" about youth—school staff, including guidance counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers—or those who we traditionally believe should care about adolescents because they are nuclear family members. Far too many young adolescents in this nation lack the aforementioned supports as school funding decreases and families' economic distress increases. Rather, we see all family members, community members, and classroom teachers playing a role in youth development and support.

We understand, however, that as university-based researchers and teacher educators, we have certain access to resources and time that might not be available to middle level teachers. For instance, with this research, Amy received funding from external sources to support her in completing this study, which gave her the time to conduct and analyze, over the course of several years, in-depth interviews with participants. We also are aware that middle grades teachers are often not afforded such luxury with their time in getting to know students and families. For these reasons, we want to draw on our own experiences as researchers and educators to share with middle grades teachers some methods they might use to

gain more in-depth and nuanced understandings of their students and the communities in which they live.

Focusing on young adolescents' families

Discussions of families' roles in education usually take place within early childhood contexts. However, recently within the fields of middle grades education and adolescent literacy, more researchers are calling for increased attention to the roles that families play in youths' learning, schooling, and educational outcomes (e.g., Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2010; Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009). Most recently, Ziomek-Daigle and Andrews (2009) delineated the critical role that parents and families play in young adolescents' potential for high school graduation. While they argued that students with parents who were heavily involved in their education were less likely to drop out of school, the authors also acknowledged the importance of schools and teachers developing policies that prompt and encourage family involvement. The involvement of families is no longer the domain of early childhood and elementary settings. Rather, involving families must permeate all aspects of K–12 education.

Authors of the Carnegie Corporation of New York's report on Adolescent Literacy (2005) make this point patently clear, arguing that families cannot be overlooked as playing significant and critical roles in the educational experiences of adolescent youth:

Despite the conventional wisdom about adolescent rebelliousness, young adolescents moving toward independence are still intimately tied to their families; they still have much to learn and more growing to do. Whatever their ethnicity and economic circumstances, in survey after survey they reveal a yearning for parental attention and guidance in making educational and career decisions, in forming a set of values, and in assuming adult roles. Not only do they want the supportive guidance of their parents, they desire it of other adults as well. (pp. 15–16)

The words of Jonathan, BeBe, and Amber give voice to the research findings within the field of middle grades education. Contrary to popular conceptions about the lives of African American youth, Jonathan, BeBe, and Amber all explicitly recount the impact that family has had on their educational experiences. For these reasons,

getting to know families and the roles they play in young adolescents' educational lives is an important goal for middle grades teachers.

In the remaining sections, we write to middle grades teachers who want to learn methods for getting to know their students better and are interested in becoming more knowledgeable about their students so they can make instruction more meaningful for them. We will suggest a few ways these teachers can become more knowledgeable about youth and their families within their classrooms. We describe how extending our knowledge about youth and families can be embedded within existing classroom practices rather than merely "tacked on."



Teachers can create more meaningful learning experiences for students by making explicit connections to their families and communities.

photo by Ken Clutsum

From the stories of adolescent youth in Pinesville, we believe there are three things middle grades educators can do to enhance the roles of families in youths' schooling. Amber's story of intentionally piecing together a family from supportive adults within her life taught us how educators must rethink what counts as family. Too often, educators apply a nuclear definition of family to the diverse and sometimes very complex family configurations of today's youth. Such a definition prevents educators from recognizing the complex family

networks that exist, and undermines the agency youth enact as they create family units for themselves.

Jonathan's story taught us the importance of making space for personal narrative in the classroom. Through personal narratives, middle grades educators can

immediately, distantly, and associatively who work together to sustain themselves in spite of challenges or obstacles. Because families have such diverse structures, teachers and researchers must modify their beliefs about normative family structures to include multiple

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uncover the rich and extensive educational legacies of the youth in their classrooms. Teachers across content areas, therefore, must learn to adapt their pedagogies to make room for the voices and experiences of *all* the students they teach.

Finally, BeBe's story reminded us of the important role educators can play as advocates and guides for students and their families. As Ziomek-Daigle and Andrews (2009) highlighted, involving families is an important and critical function of teaching in the middle grades. Teachers have an obligation to inform families of educational opportunities and pathways that exist within and beyond the community and to support youth and their families in achieving their immediate and eventual educational goals.

Rethinking the meaning of "family"

A teacher who wants to connect more meaningfully with her students and their families should begin by asking who comprises a family. While a significant body of literature seeks to understand and unpack the various definitions of "family" (e.g., Bender, 1967; Leichter, 1974, 1978; Reiss, 1965), we focus on Vivian Gadsden's research (1992, 1998, 1999, 2000) on African American families and family cultures to understand this concept. Elsewhere, Amy has used Gadsden's (1998) concept of "extendedness" to illustrate the depth and breadth of relationships in one African American family (Johnson, 2010). Gadsden argued that European American families are typically organized according to a triadic family model (i.e., mother-father-child), whereas African American families are typically organized across several households and children are often not considered to be the "possessions of a single, private family" (p. 229). According to Gadsden, African American families are best understood as a network of persons related

generations and extended family and non-family members. In short, teachers and researchers can no longer assume a common or accepted definition of family exists across cultures (Gadsden, 2000).

Using narrative inquiry as a teaching tool

We urge middle grades teachers to learn how research methods such as narrative inquiry can be incorporated into their teaching repertoires. Narrative is an important pedagogical resource for teachers because, as Nystrand and associates (1997) and others have shown, educators who encourage narratives are more likely to have classrooms in which students' voices and experiences are valued (Egan, 1989; Gallas, 1994; Juzwik, 2009; Middleton, 1993; Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEachen, 2002). Teachers can use narrative inquiry to learn about students' lives—their real-life worlds, their cultural backgrounds, and their family and community experiences—and they can leverage that information to make their teaching more culturally relevant.

We define narrative inquiry as "a methodological approach for understanding people's representations of the world and their actions in it through the stories they tell" (Gomez, 1997, p. 35). Other recommended resources for learning how to use narrative as a form of inquiry include the work of Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). They wrote:

As researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which ... [participants] live and work, their classrooms, their schools, and their communities are also in the midst when we

researchers arrive. Their institutions and their communities, their landscapes in the broadest sense, are also in the midst of stories. (pp. 63–64)

Connelly and Clandinin emphasized how all of us are storied people, and in each encounter we have with students or families, we are but one interaction in a series of interactions that people have every day. Because teachers interact daily with students, their encounters with them are significant. Teachers can encourage, understand, be thoughtful, or be responsive to their students, or they can dismiss, ignore, or rebuke them. As the stories of Amber, Jonathan, and BeBe illustrate, how teachers receive and respond to students is crucial, especially as they reach adolescence.

Recently, as we read Webb's (2009) words regarding ethical research practices for narrative inquirers, we saw how these specifically resonate with teaching. She stated, "The qualities needed [by ethical researchers] are humility, openness to seeking and receiving feedback, transparency, self-awareness, sense of perspective, sensitivity to others' needs, a sense of humor and patience" (p. 237). The qualities she lists as essential for ethical researchers, specifically humility, openness, self-awareness, perspective, and sensitivity, seem much like those dimensions of middle level teachers that we admire.

For example, in 2002–2003, Mary Louise conducted a research project in a middle level classroom in a mid-sized Midwestern city, populated by many populated by many students from low socioeconomic status families, many of whom also were African American (Gomez, 2004). Students were assigned to this classroom because they were not reading as well as they, their parents, or teachers had hoped. Students in the class often seemed discouraged, were disengaged from literacy learning, were rude to their teacher, and frequently were asked to leave the classroom because of their behavior. A year or two later, Mary Louise returned to the classroom and observed this veteran teacher again. On these occasions, similar students, also struggling to learn to read, were engaged in their reading, held lively conversations with their teacher, Ms. Smith, and showed deep understanding of the literature they were reading.

What made the difference? Ms. Smith said she had discovered the power of personal narrative from her reading and speaking with other teachers about her dilemmas with students in her reading course. Every day at the start of class, she invited students to talk about

their lives for 15 to 20 minutes. This may seem like a long time in a 55-minute period; however, for the students, it may have been the only sustained time they had to talk about themselves to a caring adult and peers in a school day. Often, they talked about their worries—going on a diet because of fears of being "fat," a niece who was just learning to walk at age two, or an unmarried teenage sister who was pregnant a second time. The teacher and students were a community of good listeners and supporters of one another.

Ms. Smith acknowledged that after students had time to talk about their personal concerns, they seemed ready and able to turn toward school concerns and that the stories told were rarely shared with others outside the classroom. Mary Louise was surprised how, after the personal storytelling, the students happily



When students have opportunities to talk to caring adults about nonacademic concerns during the school day, they are often better able to engage in their academic work. photo by Ken Clutsam

turned to their task for the day and discussed the short story they had read, sometimes making connections from their lives to the story at hand. Admittedly, Ms. Smith was a skillful teacher who had taught middle grades youth for many years. However, her pedagogical practices just a year or two earlier had not been effective with a similar group and had been eschewed by students. We suggest it was her recognition and honoring of students as people

“in the midst of living their stories” when entering her classroom that made a great difference in her teaching and their learning.

Although personal narrative seems best suited for language arts and social studies classrooms, where discussion and sharing of personal experiences play a more obvious role in instruction, an increasing number of educators in mathematics and science education have reported using narrative forms and discourse in their classrooms (e.g., Burton, 1996, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1986; Kelly, 2007; Textual Tools Study Group, 2006). Throughout this work on narrative in mathematics and science classrooms, teachers and researchers have

We also saw how Amber turned to her teachers as family members. These adults were able to show her the ropes and give her the support she needed to reach her educational goals. Amber’s story reminds us how important it is for teachers to step into the family role when they recognize a student needs them to do so.

In another research project, Mary Louise and her colleagues (2008) investigated the life histories of Latino/a prospective teachers (Gomez, Rodriguez, & Agosto, 2008). One participant in that research project, Aurora Villagoza, demonstrated the power one caring teacher can have for students. Aurora used the word “distanced” when discussing her feelings about most of

Teachers can draw on students’ personal narratives to enhance and enrich their academic learning and lives by simply asking them what challenges and needs they are experiencing inside and outside school.

noted the ways it opens up new possibilities for learning by allowing students to express their thinking through multiple discourse and interactional patterns. We strongly urge middle level educators to study this kind of research to learn more about how narrative research methods might be incorporated into their instruction so that they can learn more about how students use their life experiences to connect with rigorous academic content.

Teaching as advocacy and support

As Ziomek-Daigle and Andrews (2009) reminded us, the students who are most successful in school often have parents and families who are plugged in to the culture of school and schooling, in general. Such “plugged in” parents, like BeBe’s mother, know what resources are available for their children and how to leverage these resources for their children’s educational advantage. However, parents are not often in the same position as BeBe’s mother, who was herself a middle level teacher. By virtue of her position, she was already plugged in to how the educational system works and was already knowledgeable about the resources available within her community for supporting BeBe’s education. Clearly, parents who are not as knowledgeable as BeBe’s mother must rely on teachers and other school personnel for information and guidance.

her teachers; she felt they interpreted her as coming from a low socioeconomic status family with little academic promise. By her own account, she spoke a mixture of Spanish and English upon coming to school, and she felt her language background and skills also influenced her teachers’ perceptions of her.

One person who looked past her social class and language background was her theater and drama teacher, Mr. Rosenberg. While other teachers saw many deficits as they interacted with Aurora, Mr. Rosenberg saw only assets—her sense of humor, quick wit, and talent for acting. She characterized him as kind and caring; for example, he sometimes drove her home after play practice when it was late and she had no other transportation—her father was absent and her mother was disabled and could not drive. He also shared dimensions of his own life with her, including his Jewish heritage and cultural practices.

Aurora continued communicating with Mr. Rosenberg after she left K–12 schooling and during her teacher preparation, occasionally calling him when college life went awry and she was upset. Her mother lived far from her university and missed her greatly, and Aurora knew she would tell her to “just come home” if things were not going well. Also, her mother had no post-secondary school experiences on which to draw, whereas Mr. Rosenberg had been a successful college student. When Aurora was having difficulties, he often

offered her advice or shared way he had handled similar personal experiences.

Mr. Rosenberg was an exceptional teacher and mentor to Aurora. He continued nurturing and guiding her far beyond the scope of the traditional obligations of a teacher. He was willing to go the extra mile for Aurora, stepping out of what some might see as his role as a classroom teacher. As Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Monroe had done with Amber, Mr. Rosenberg functioned as an extended family member for Aurora.

While preparing to teach, Aurora saw that she, too, could reach out and offer similar support to a young male Spanish speaker who was struggling in the fifth grade classroom where she was working. She worked to tie soccer, which she knew was his passion outside school, to conversations they were having inside the classroom. This signaled to the student that Aurora was interested in him as a person and that she saw more than his struggles to learn—she saw his assets as well. Aurora had internalized the example of advocacy and support Mr. Rosenberg had offered. It was now her turn to help a student in need, just as he had supported her.

Implications for educators

In sharing the above stories, we are not calling for middle grades administrators or teachers to adopt yet another program for parental and community involvement. Rather, we see many ways middle level educators can connect with students' personal lives and families as part of their everyday work. Teachers can draw on students' personal narratives to enhance and enrich their academic learning and lives by simply asking them what challenges and needs they are experiencing inside and outside school. As Mary Louise's study of Ms. Smith demonstrates (Gomez, 2004), direct questioning by teachers, which may be perceived as nosy or intrusive, most often is not necessary. Providing time to talk and a willing ear to listen are often the only ingredients needed to make students feel teachers are concerned for them. Listening closely and with care to the stories and experiences of young adolescents is critical for connecting with students and for identifying the role family plays in their educational lives. However, this is only the first step. Middle level teachers can recognize what students require at the moment and respond as Mr. Rosenberg, or Amber's teachers, Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Monroe, did with simple yet needed advice. As we

see it, Mr. Rosenberg, Mr. Hunter, and Mrs. Monroe all comprise these youths' extended family networks, providing the support students need to stay in school and be focused and calm in difficult moments. Such family-like sharing of ourselves and our values offers young people a sense of stability and a moral compass when one is needed.

So, as we listen to young adolescents' stories and experiences, we should take care to recognize the moments when we are being asked to join their networks and to provide support. As our examples have shown, teachers who take genuine interest in the well-being of students and act on their behalf can lead them toward greater learning, deeper affiliation with schooling, and reciprocally rewarding relationships with teachers and other adults.

Extensions

During your next team meeting, discuss with your colleagues the different kinds of family networks that may be present in the community your school serves. Brainstorm some ways you can tap into these networks and get to know and support your students better.

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